

CHAPTER TWO

Barriers to Communication

A barrier to communication is something that keeps meanings from meeting. Meaning barriers exist between all people, making communication much more difficult than most people seem to realize. It is false to assume that if one can talk he can communicate. Because so much of our education misleads people into thinking that communication is easier than it is, they become discouraged and give up when they run into difficulty. Because they do not understand the nature of the problem, they do not know what to do. The wonder is not that communicating is as difficult as it is, but that it occurs as much as it does.¹

—Reuel Howe,
theologian and educator

COMMON COMMUNICATION SPOILERS

Sue Maxwell, a woman in her mid-thirties, sighed as she said, "Well, I blew it again. We took the family to visit my parents over Thanksgiving weekend. They have been under heavy emotional and financial pressure this year, and I resolved to be very gentle and caring with them. But they started criticizing the way I handle the kids and I got mad. I told them they didn't do such a great job with me and my brother. We argued for half an hour. All three of us felt very hurt.

"This type of thing happens each time I return home," Sue continued. "Even though they have no right to say some of the things they do, I love them and want our visits to be pleasant. But somehow, we almost always say things that hurt each other."

Sue's experience is, unfortunately, a common one. Whether it is with parents, children, bosses, employees, colleagues, friends, or "all of the above," people usually long for better interpersonal results than they commonly achieve.

Since there is in most of us a strong desire for effective communication, why is it so rare and difficult to establish? One of the prime reasons is that, without realizing it, people typically inject communication barriers into their conversations. It has been estimated that *these barriers are used over 90 percent of the time* when one or both parties to a conversation has a problem to be dealt with or a need to be fulfilled.²

Communication barriers are *high-risk responses*—that is, responses whose impact on communication is frequently (though not inevitably) negative. These roadblocks are more likely to be destructive when one or more persons who are interacting are under stress. The unfortunate effects of communication blocks are many and varied. They frequently diminish the other's self-esteem. They tend to trigger defensiveness, resistance, and resentment. They can lead to dependency, withdrawal, feelings of defeat or of inadequacy. They decrease the likelihood that the other will find her own solution to her problem. Each roadblock is a "feeling-blocker"; it reduces the likelihood that the other will constructively express her true feelings. Because communication roadblocks carry a high risk of fostering these negative results, their repeated use can cause permanent damage to a relationship.

What specific barriers are apt to hinder a conversation? Experts in interpersonal communication like Carl Rogers, Reuel Howe, Haim Ginott, and Jack Gibb³ have pinpointed responses that tend to block conversation. More recently, Thomas Gordon⁴ devised a comprehensive list that he calls the "dirty dozen" of communication spoilers. These undesirable responses include:

Criticizing: Making a negative evaluation of the other person, her actions, or attitudes. "You brought it on yourself—you've got nobody else to blame for the mess you are in."

Name-calling: "Putting down" or stereotyping the other person "What a doper!" "Just like a woman. . . ." "Egghead." "You hardhats are all alike." "You are just another insensitive male."

Diagnosing: Analyzing why a person is behaving as she is; playing amateur psychiatrist. "I can read you like a book—you are just doing that to irritate me." "Just because you went to college, you think you are better than I."

Praising Evaluatively: Making a positive judgment of the other person, her actions, or attitudes. "You are always such a good girl. I know you will help me with the lawn tonight." Teacher to teenage student: "You are a great poet." (Many people find it difficult to believe that some of the barriers like praise are high-risk responses. Later, I will explain why I believe repeated use of these responses can be detrimental to relationships.)

Ordering: Commanding the other person to do what you want to have done. "Do your homework right now." "Why? Because I said so. . . ."

Threatening: Trying to control the other's actions by warning of negative consequences that you will instigate. "You'll do it or else . . ." "Stop that noise right now or I will keep the whole class after school."

Moralizing: Telling another person what she *should* do. "Preaching" at the other. "You shouldn't get a divorce; think of what will happen to the children." "You ought to tell him you are sorry."

Excessive/Inappropriate Questioning: Closed-ended questions are often barriers in a relationship; these are those that can usually be answered in a few words—often with a simple yes or no. "When did it happen?" "Are you sorry that you did it?"

Advising: Giving the other person a solution to her problems. "If I were you, I'd sure tell him off." "That's an easy one to solve. First . . ."

Diverting: Pushing the other's problems aside through distraction. "Don't dwell on it, Sarah. Let's talk about something more pleasant." Or, "Think you've got it bad? Let me tell you what happened to me."

Logical argument: Attempting to convince the other with an appeal to facts or logic, usually without consideration of the emotional factors involved. "Look at the facts; if you hadn't bought that new car, we could have made the down payment on the house."

Reassuring: Trying to stop the other person from feeling the negative emotions she is experiencing. "Don't worry, it is always darkest before the dawn." "It will all work out OK in the end."

WHY ROADBLOCKS ARE HIGH-RISK RESPONSES

At first glance, some of these barriers seem quite innocent. Praise, reassurance, logical responses, questions, and well-intentioned advice are often thought of as positive factors in interpersonal relations. Why, then, do behavioral scientists think of these twelve types of responses as potentially damaging to communication?

These twelve ways of responding are viewed as *high-risk* responses, rather than *inevitably* destructive elements of all communication. They are more likely to block conversation, thwart the other person's problem-solving efficiency, and increase the emotional distance between people than other ways of communicating. However, at times, people use these responses with little or no obvious negative effect.

If one or two persons are experiencing a strong need or wrestling with a difficult problem, the likelihood of negative impact from roadblocks increases greatly. A useful guideline to follow is, "Whenever you or the other person is experiencing stress, avoid all roadblocks." Unfortunately, it is precisely when stress is experienced that we are most likely to use these high-risk responses.

The twelve barriers to communication can be divided into three major categories: judgment, sending solutions, and avoidance of the other's concerns:

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|--|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. Criticizing | } | JUDGING |
| 2. Name-calling | | |
| 3. Diagnosing | | |
| 4. Praising Evaluatively | | |
| 5. Ordering | } | SENDING SOLUTIONS |
| 6. Threatening | | |
| 7. Moralizing | | |
| 8. Excessive/Inappropriate Questioning | | |
| 9. Advising | | |
| 10. Diverting | } | AVOIDING THE OTHER'S CONCERNS |
| 11. Logical Argument | | |
| 12. Reassuring | | |

Let's look in greater detail at each of these major categories of high-risk responses.

JUDGING: THE MAJOR ROADBLOCK

Four roadblocks fall into this category—criticizing, name-calling, diagnosing, and praising. They are all variations on a common theme—judging the other person.

Psychologist Carl Rogers delivered a lecture on communication in which he said he believes the *major barrier* to interpersonal communication lies in our *very natural tendency to judge*—to approve or disapprove of the statements of the other person.⁵

Few people think of themselves as judgmental. Yet in that lecture, Rogers convinced many of his listeners that the tendency to judge was more widespread than they realized:

As you leave the meeting tonight, one of the statements you are likely to hear is, "I didn't like that man's talk." Now what do you respond? Almost invariably your reply will be either approval or disapproval of the attitude expressed. Either you respond, "I didn't either. I thought it was terrible." Or else you tend to reply, "Oh, I thought it was really good." In other words, your primary reaction is to evaluate what has just been said to you, to evaluate it from your point of view, your own frame of reference.

Or, take another example. Suppose I say with some feeling, "I think the Republicans are behaving in ways that show a lot of good sound sense these days." What is the response that arises in your mind as you listen? The overwhelming likelihood is that it will be evaluative. You will find yourself agreeing, or disagreeing, or making some judgment about me such as "He must be a conservative," or "He seems solid in his thinking."

In that same speech, Rogers made another important point about the human inclination to be judgmental:

Although the tendency to make evaluations is common in almost all interchange of language, it is very much heightened in those situations where feelings and emotions are deeply involved. So, the stronger our feelings, the more likely it is that there will be no mutual element in the communication. There will be just two ideas, two feelings, two judgments missing each other in psychological space. I'm sure you recognize this from your own experience. When you have not been emotionally involved yourself, and have listened to a heated discussion, you often go away thinking, "Well, they actually weren't talking about the same thing." And they were not. Each was making a judgment, an evaluation from his own frame of reference. There was really nothing which could be called communication in any genuine sense. This tendency to react to any emotionally meaningful statement by forming an evaluation of it from our own point of view is, I repeat, the major barrier to interpersonal communication.⁶

Criticizing

One of the judgmental roadblocks is criticism. Many of us feel we ought to be critical—or other people will never improve. Parents think they need to judge their children or they will never become hard-working, mannerly adults. Teachers think they must criticize their students or they will never learn. Supervisors think they must criticize their employees or production will slip. In later chapters we will see how some of the objectives we are trying to accomplish with criticism (and the other roadblocks) can be achieved more effectively by other means.

Meanwhile, it is worth observing our interactions with others to see how frequently we are critical. For some people, criticism is a way of life. One husband described his wife as being on a constant fault-finding safari. An admiral once gave White House aide Harry Hopkins the title of "Generalissimo of the Needle Brigade"⁷ because of the latter's critical nature.

Name-Calling and Labeling

Name-calling and labeling usually have negative overtones to both the sender and receiver. "Nigger," "Wasp," "intellectual," "brat," "bitch," "shrew," "autocrat," "jerk," "dope," "nag"—these all attach a stigma to the other. Some other labels, however, provide halos: "bright," "hard worker," "dedicated," "a chip off the old block," "a real go-getter."

Labeling prevents us from getting to know ourselves and other individuals: there is no longer a person before us—only a type. The psychologist Clark Moustakas says:

Labels and classifications make it appear that we know the other, when actually, we have caught the shadow and not the substance. Since we are convinced we know ourselves and others . . . [we] no longer actually see what is happening before us and in us, and, not knowing that we do not know, we make no effort to be in contact with the real. We continue to use labels to stereotype ourselves and others, and these labels have replaced human meanings, unique feelings and growing life within and between persons.⁸

Diagnosing

Diagnosis, a form of labeling, has plagued mankind through the centuries, but has been even more prevalent since the time of Freud. Some people, instead of listening to the substance of what a person is saying, play emotional detective, probing for hidden motives, psychological complexes, and the like.

A secretary who went to work for a psychologist resigned within a month. When a friend asked why she left the job, she explained, "He analyzed what motives were behind everything I did. I couldn't win. If I came to work late, it was because I was hostile; if I came early, it was because I was anxious; if I arrived on time, I was compulsive."

Perhaps you have found, as I have, that communication tends to be thwarted when one person informs another that she is being defensive, or self-deceiving, or that she is acting out of guilt or fear or some other unconscious motive or "complex."

Praising Evaluatively

There is a common belief that all honest praise is helpful. Many parents, teachers, managers, and others endorse praise without reservation. Praise "is supposed to build confidence, increase security, stimulate initiative, motivate learning, generate good will and improve human relations," says Haim Ginott.⁹ Thus, at first sight, praise seems to be an unlikely candidate to qualify as a roadblock. However, positive evaluations often have negative results.

Praise is often used as a gimmick to try to get people to change their behavior. When someone with ulterior purposes offers praise, there is often resentment, not only of the effort to control, but also of the manipulateness experienced. David Augsburg says that it is not always true that to be praised is to be loved. "To be praised more often is to be manipulated. To be praised is often to be used. To be praised is often to be outsmarted, outmaneuvered, out-sweet-talked."¹⁰

Even when it is not used manipulatively, praise often has detrimental effects. Have you ever noticed how people defend themselves against praise as though they were protecting themselves against a threat? Their guardedness and defensiveness cause them to come up with stock denials such as:

"I don't think it's that good."

"It wasn't much, really."

"I can't take the credit for it; my assistant, Charlie, thought it up."

"It was mainly luck."

"I could have done a lot better."

When people hear about the perils of evaluative praise, they often think behavioral scientists believe *all* forms of encouragement are detrimental. This is far from the case. Expressing positive feelings toward people is an important element of interpersonal communication. Constructive ways of doing this will be explained in Chapter 9.

SENDING SOLUTIONS CAN BE A PROBLEM!

Another group of roadblocks involves sending solutions to other persons. The solutions may be sent caringly as advice, indirectly by questioning, authoritatively as an order, aggressively as a threat, or with a halo around it as moralizing. Some ways of sending solutions obviously carry higher risks than others. *All* of these ways of sending solutions, however, are potential barriers to communication, especially when one or both of the persons is experiencing a need or a

problem. Sending a solution often compounds a problem or creates new problems without resolving the original dilemma.

Ordering, threatening, moralizing, advising (and often asking closed-ended questions), are ways of sending solutions. I am not suggesting that sending solutions is never appropriate, but sending solutions can erect barriers and can thwart another person's growth.

Ordering

An order is a solution sent coercively and backed by force. When coercion is used, people often become resistant and resentful. Sabotage may result. Or people who are constantly given orders may become very compliant and submissive. Orders imply that the other's judgment is unsound and thus tend to undermine self-esteem.

Threatening

A threat is a solution that is sent with an emphasis on the punishment that will be forthcoming if the solution is not implemented. Threats produce the same kind of negative results that are produced by orders.

Moralizing

Many people love to put a halo around their solutions for others. They attempt to back their ideas with the force of social, moral, or theological authority. Moralizing speaks with "shoulds" and "oughts" but it chooses other wordings, too. "It's the right thing to do." "You don't visit me enough." "Shoulds" are often implied, even when they are not stated directly.

"Moralizing is demoralizing." It fosters anxiety, arouses resentment, tends to thwart honest self-expression, and invites pretense.

Excessive or Inappropriate Questioning

Some kinds of questions have their place in communication. But questions can be real conversation-stoppers, as illustrated in this familiar question-and-nonresponse routine:

"Where did you go?"

"Out."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

Day after day, parents in American homes ask, "How was school today?" and day after day they hear the droned nonresponse, "OK."

Some people ask questions constantly. When this happens, they experience an almost total drying up of conversation. When loved ones share so little with them, these questioners desperately resort to more questions to keep at least a trickle of disclosure coming from the other person. But the added questions retard the communication even more.

A large percentage of the population is addicted to questioning. While there are constructive ways of asking *occasional* questions (as will be seen in the next chapter), extensive questioning usually derails a conversation. Jacques Lalanne, president of the Institut de Developpement Humain in Quebec, says, "In everyday conversation, questions are usually a poor substitute for more direct communication. Questions are incomplete, indirect, veiled, impersonal and consequently ineffective messages that often breed defense reactions and resistance. They are rarely simple requests for information, but an indirect means of attaining an end, a way of manipulating the person being questioned."¹¹

Advising

Advice is another of the most commonly used of the roadblocks. At its worst, it represents an "interference-complex." Though I have known and taught others many of the important reasons why advice is rarely constructive, and though I have decreased my advice-giving enormously, I still find myself dispensing advice inappropriately. The advice-giving trap is a rather constant temptation to me, and I find I am most apt to give in to it when someone I love talks over a problem with me.

Well, what's wrong with advice? Advice is often a basic insult to the intelligence of the other person. It implies a lack of confidence in the capacity of the person with the problem to understand and cope with his or her own difficulties. As Norman Kagan puts it, "In essence, we implicitly say to someone, 'You have been making a "big deal" out of a problem whose solution is immediately apparent to me—how stupid you are!'"¹²

Another problem with advice is that the advisor seldom understands the full implications of the problem. When people share their concerns with us, they often display only the "tip of the iceberg." The advisor is unaware of the complexities, feelings, and the many other factors that lie hidden beneath the surface. Dag Hammarskjöld, the introspective Swedish diplomat, said:

*Not knowing the question,
It was easy for him
To give the answer.¹³*

AVOIDING THE OTHER'S CONCERNS

A journalist once commented that the first law of conversation is that if there is any possible way to derail the train of dialogue, someone will do it. The remaining three roadblocks—diverting, logical argument, and reassurance—are notable for getting conversations off the track.

Diverting

One of the most frequent ways of switching a conversation from the other person's concerns to your own topic is called "diverting." The phrase "Speaking of . . ." often signals the beginning of a diversion. Much of what passes for conversation is really little more than a series of diversions. For example, I overheard this interchange between four elderly ladies visiting a friend in a hospital:

- Patient: This was such a painful operation! I didn't think I would be able to stand it. It was just . . .
- Person A: Speaking of operations, I had my gallbladder out in Memorial Hospital in 1976. What a time I had . . .
- Person B: That's the hospital my grandson was taken to when he broke his arm. Dr. Beyer set it.
- Person C: Did you know that Dr. Beyer lives on my street? They say he has an alcohol problem.
- Person D: Well, alcohol is not nearly so bad as drugs. The son of the principal of the high school is really messed up by drugs. He shouldn't deal with other people's kids if he can't manage his own.

Whoa! What happened to the patient's concerns?

Sometimes people divert a conversation because they lack the awareness and skills to listen effectively. Sometimes they are grabbing the focus of attention for themselves. At other times people resort to diversion when they are uncomfortable with the emotions stimulated by the conversation. Many people dislike talking about affection, anger, conflict, death, sickness, divorce, and other topics that create tension in them. When these topics are the focus of conversation, they divert the conversation to a topic more comfortable for them.

Logical Argument

Logic has many important functions. When another person is under stress, however, or when there is conflict between people, providing logical solutions can be infuriating. Though it may seem that those are the very times we most need logic, it nevertheless has a high risk of alienating the other person.

One of the main problems with logic in situations of personal or interpersonal stress is that it keeps others at an emotional distance. Logic focuses on facts and typically avoids feelings. But when another person has a problem or when there is a problem in the relationship, feelings are the main issue. When persons use logic to avoid emotional involvement, they are withdrawing from another at a most inopportune moment.

Reassuring

"What on earth can be wrong with reassurance?" is a question we get from many people.

Like the other eleven barriers, reassurance can drive a wedge between people. Haim Ginott writes:

Once in a blue moon, almost every parent hears his son or daughter declare, "I am stupid." Knowing that *his* child cannot be stupid, the parent sets out to convince him that he is bright.

Son: I am stupid.
 Father: You are not stupid.
 Son: Yes, I am.
 Father: You are not. Remember how smart you were at camp? The counselor thought you were one of the brightest.
 Son: How do you know what he thought?
 Father: He told me so.
 Son: Yeah, how come he called me stupid all the time?
 Father: He was just kidding.
 Son: I am stupid, and I know it. Look at my grades in school.
 Father: You just have to work harder.
 Son: I already work harder, and it doesn't help. I have no brains.
 Father: You are smart, I know.
 Son: I am stupid, I know.
 Father: (loudly) You are not stupid!
 Son: Yes, I am!
 Father: You are not stupid, Stupid!

Ginott goes on to explain:

When a child declares that he is stupid or ugly or bad, nothing that we can say or do will change his self-image immediately. A person's ingrained opinion of himself resists direct attempts at alteration. As one child said to his father, I know you mean well, Dad, but I am not *that* stupid to take your word that I am bright.¹⁴

Reassurance is a way of seeming to comfort another person while actually doing the opposite. The word *comfort* comes from two Latin words, *con* and *fortis*. The combination literally means "strengthened by being with." Reassurance does not allow the comforter to really be with the other. It can be a form of emotional withdrawal. Reassurance is often used by people who like the idea of being helpful but who do not want to experience the emotional demand that goes with it.

ROADBLOCK NUMBER THIRTEEN

When people are introduced to the roadblocks, a fairly typical reaction is, "That's just what my husband has been doing all these years! Wait till I tell him about all the roadblocks he sends." Or, "Gosh, my boss uses just about all of these barriers. The next time he does it, I'm going to point out how he's roadblocking me." This is Roadblock Thirteen: telling other people they are sending roadblocks. Roadblock Thirteen belongs in the judgment category. If you want to improve your communication, pointing the finger of judgment at others is a poor place to begin.

Guilt, Remorse, Regret

After hearing a presentation on the roadblocks, many people experience pangs of guilt. They suddenly become aware that some patterns of their communication are barriers in important relationships and have probably caused needless distance between them and other people. After presentations on communications barriers in our workshops, people typically make comments like these:

Awareness of the three major groupings of roadblocks was like a stab and I cringe for all the situations that I "blew" that could have been productive had I known how to respond properly. . . .

It's like suddenly knowing the enemy and finding out that it's *me*! . . .

I had always thought of myself as a "good listener," never realizing that I was often guilty of actually shutting off communication by the way I was listening. . . .

The responses you identified as barriers were things I'd always felt *helped* conversation, and I've been using many of them pretty consistently! As I listened to you talk about the roadblocks, I felt remorse and regret. These thoughts flew into my mind: "I've failed as a parent and a teacher." "I wish I could have learned this fifteen years ago." "How did I get to be forty years old without discovering that these were roadblocks?" After the guilt, however, I became hopeful. After all, it is practically impossible to counter a negative approach unless you know that it is destructive. Learning about the roadblocks is the first step to positive action for me.

We all use roadblocks sometimes. Their occasional usage rarely does much harm to a relationship. When employed frequently, however, there is a high probability that roadblocks will do considerable harm.

These conversational bad habits can be corrected. The awareness that comes from reading a chapter like this can help greatly. You can figure out which roadblock you most want to eliminate and concentrate on eradicating that one. It is difficult and discouraging work at first because roadblocks are habitual ways of responding and it requires time and effort to change any habit. At the same time that you try to eliminate the roadblocks, you can use the communication skills described in the remainder of this book. Several thousand years ago, a sage taught that it is much easier to stamp out a bad habit by supplanting it with a good one than it is to try to stamp out negative habits by willpower alone.¹⁵ That wisdom still holds today. As you learn to listen, assert, resolve conflict, and solve interpersonal problems more effectively, your use of the roadblocks will inevitably diminish.

SUMMARY

Certain ways of verbalizing carry a high risk of putting a damper on the conversation, being harmful to the relationship, triggering feelings of inadequacy, anger, or dependency in the other person, or all of these things. As a result of one or more of the twelve roadblocks, the other may become more submissive and compliant. Or she may become more resistant, rebellious, and argumentative. These barriers to conversation tend to diminish the other's self-esteem and to undermine motivation. They decrease the likelihood that the other will be self-determining—they increase the likelihood that she will put the focus of evaluation outside herself. Roadblocks are prevalent in our culture; they are used in over 90 percent of the conversations where one or both persons have a problem or a strong need. Yet these conversational bad habits can be corrected, primarily through the use of the skills taught in the remainder of this book.

PART TWO

Listening Skills

One friend, one person who is truly understanding, who takes the trouble to listen to us as we consider our problems, can change our whole outlook on the world.

—Dr. Elton Mayo¹